

One Last Lifeline by Foksydoodle

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst and Feels, Billy Hargrove Fights Monsters, Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Person, Billy Hargrove is Bad at Communicating, Billy Hargrove is His Own Warning, Billy centric, Billy just comes to Hawkins when he's fifteen and there for everything, Billy talks candidly about his abuse, Bob Newby Lives, Bob Newby and Joyce Byers are the best parents money could buy, Bob is the best dad, Fluff and Angst, Good Parent Joyce Byers, Heavy Angst, I'm telling you guys. This will make you feel things, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Same stuff happens, The harringrove will eventually come but not for a while yet, Unbeta'd, liberal use of commas, more tags to follow as they become relevant

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Joyce Byers/Bob Newby

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Summary:

Billy Hargrove moved to Hawkins Indiana with his father Neil at the age of fifteen. A year later, after several people in the school started noticing the bruises and the injuries, Neil Hargrove has been carted off to prison. Hopper's been trying to find a good home for an angry teen but none of them seem quite the perfect fit.

That is until he remembers Joyce Byers and her serious boyfriend

Bob Newby. They're absolutely Billy's last lifeline before he cuts his losses and runs off on his own to try and make his own way. After all, surely this slightly batty family doesn't want the burden of an asshole with zero communication skills and a list of issues a mile long.

Right?

A story spanning all three seasons and after in which Joyce and Bob foster Billy after Neil goes to prison for child abuse. A slight shift in timelines and certain plot points but most of it is the same so I've gone ahead and labeled it as a Canon Divergent AU. Summary to be updated as the story goes along!

One Last Lifeline

Author's Note:

A huge thanks to everyone in both the Heebie Jeebies Discord server and The Keg Gang Server. Thanks for listening to me ramble about this idea and slap you all with feels for the past two days about this!

Also thank you @strangebrainrot on tumblr for the use of Darling as Billy's middle name! I absolutely fell in love with it, and @deardmvz (MARILYN THAT'S YOU) for using her idea that Billy's mother was a huge Stevie Nicks and Fleetwood Mac fan.

Otherwise, mind the tags guys, and let me know if there's anything else I should probably tag. I hope you enjoy!

Billy Hargrove was sixteen years old and mad at the world. Sometimes it was hard to remember a time when he wasn't angry at anything and everything that entered his realm of existence. On rare occasions when it wasn't too painful to think about, he'd recall those memories of a woman in white, calling out to him from the beach to watch for rip currents. Sometimes he could remember her proud smile without the pain of rejection curling up and rotting in his chest. Sometimes just seeing his own blonde hair in the mirror was enough to send him down a spiral of self hatred for days.

Billy had always found that a little ironic if he was honest with himself. The one thing that he would always be able to hold over Neil's head was that his father would never be able to hate him more than Billy hated himself. In its own fucked up way it was comforting in those dark hours laying on the floor, willing himself to get up when all his muscles screamed at him just to lay there. His mind always screamed louder that the longer he laid there, the more the blood would stain the floor and the harder it would be to clean it up.

That was the hilarity of it all though, that Neil was the one who would cause all of this pain and blood, yet Billy was the one who needed to clean up the mess he'd made.

That was then, but that wasn't his life anymore. Billy almost wasn't sure whether he was happy about that or not and didn't that make him fucked up as all hell? With Neil, he'd known what to expect. He broke the rules, he got the shit kicked out of him. The specifics were variables of course, what room they were in when Neil finally caught up to him, the severity of the crime, the man's mood... but the result was always the same. Billy fucked up, Neil fucked him up, without fail. Sometimes it didn't even matter if he had fucked up or not. He knew how to read Neil, knew how to roll with his punches, and how to catch himself when he fell. With all these families he'd been placed with over the past few months, the not knowing was the hardest part.

Neil Hargrove hadn't expected the smaller schools in Indiana to take more notice of their students. There were only so many excuses he could make before the nurse, who his teachers *always* sent him to, started looking more worried each time. Then the principal was involved, and Chief Hopper, and then he was being taken to so many different places his head was spinning. Neil was in prison, not likely to get out any time soon, but still a demon in his closet that Billy would deny a thousand times over.

He hated moving around from place to place. None of the families he was placed with understood why his eyes took in each room quickly, darting back and forth to memorize as much about it in as short an amount of time as possible. What corners should he avoid, was that glass table sturdy enough to keep from breaking under his weight, were those picture frames hung high enough that he could avoid them?

The Hollands, his first, were a nice enough family but Billy hadn't been sure what to do with Mrs. Holland's strained smile, or Mr. Holland's small, porky eyes. The only time they were ever very animated was when they spoke of their daughter. She'd gone missing, but they were hopeful. Staying with them had only been temporary, a few weeks until Hopper and the Social Services bitch could find him a more permanent home. Just as well, their shrine to their red

headed daughter was a little fucking creepy, and he didn't know if he could handle even a few days more in that house where the parents were like robots, barely functioning through life any better than he was. He did try to keep his attitude in check and simply stayed quiet. He was an asshole, but even he knew when he *shouldn't* make things worse. Besides, he never went hungry with the Hollands and rather than being overbearing like he'd expected, they pretty much left him alone.

Billy wondered if he'd just been in shock over everything for those few days. After that it was like the anger came roaring back in and no matter where they put him, everything was so difficult again. The not knowing had him on edge, like he was a cup that was so full, another drop in the bucket would cause him to spill over, pouring every single thing inside him out until he was empty inside and those drips would start filling him up again. It could be anything, it was everything. The woman of the house could ask him how his day was and everything would go downhill, he'd feel trapped and cornered and he'd lash out at all of them. Inevitably, a few weeks after he would arrive, Hopper would come to get him in the cruiser and another talk was in order.

"I'm running out of places to take you kid." Hopper had said, after picking him up from the last home that just 'couldn't handle his spirited nature'.

"Then fucking don't look for another one. I'll figure out my own way." He'd said with a growl in his voice. He hated the way Hopper looked at him like a problem to be solved. Why couldn't this guy see what a fuck up he was, that nothing was ever going to work, and he wasn't worth the effort. The chief hadn't dignified that with a response, rather just running his hands down his face and sighing in frustration. Things had been quiet that night, and he'd been grateful from the reprieve. The last family he'd been with had been in a large house with several kids. The Wheelers were nice enough but they were so out of touch with each other that it was painful to watch. Nancy was about his age but hadn't deigned him worth sparing a glance, too focused on her studies and having a good image at school. Mike had simply glared at him for taking up his beloved basement as a bedroom and had been an all around prick, shooting scathing

comments that had Mrs. Wheeler grounding him and causing him to throw a tantrum. Holly was about the only good thing about that family, unable to talk and throwing peas at him at dinner time. He'd liked her but she was rarely off of Mrs. Wheeler's hip for him to think about spending much time with her. It had been an explosion at Mike, full of hateful words and more than a few curses that had Mrs. Wheeler calling the Chief with a whispered comment.

"I just don't think we can give this boy what he needs. Michael has exhibited behavioral issues since he came and I just... we're not a right fit." Of course... her precious children were more important than some hellion child that had been pushed off on her because no one else wanted him.

Billy hadn't slept that night on Hopper's couch, an all too familiar place to find himself these days, too busy thinking about how much more of this placement in homes that didn't really want him he could take. In a way it hurt more than living with Neil ever had. Even if all the bastard had wanted was a punching bag, at least he'd kept him around. At least he didn't have to wonder what his breaking point was. Billy had felt like he'd always known that if he reached that breaking point with his father... well he wouldn't have to worry about how much it hurt the next day.

He toyed with the idea of running away, lying about his age, getting a job somewhere and making his life that way. He liked school, enjoyed learning, but it had long been an understanding that Billy Hargrove didn't *get* to enjoy things. They were always taken from him in the end. The thought of his mother had come unbidden then, and there in the quiet of the cabin, he'd pulled the blanket tighter around himself and blinked away the hot, angry tears he hadn't shed in years for her. He wasn't about to shed them now. Despite the happy memories he tried to hold on to, he'd never let himself forget that she had *left* him. Just like every other good thing in his life, he wasn't allowed to hold on to her either. She must have known what a piece of shit he was then to leave him with Neil. The kind of monster Neil was hadn't been a secret, she had experienced it herself and apparently it didn't matter that Billy had tried to protect her from him. No good deed went unpunished and his punishment for standing up for her was to be discarded, left behind like the piece of trash he

was. If she didn't want him, then surely she wouldn't want his tears either and he wouldn't give up any more of himself to someone who didn't want him.

The next day after school, he was sitting at Hopper's tiny kitchen table, pushing his peas into the cardboard mashed potatoes to make them easier to scoop on his fork when the Chief announced that he'd found a new place for Billy to stay. Blue eyes shot up immediately, brows drawing down in frustration when he actually took in the hopeful sound of his voice. Hopper had never sounded like that before about a family he wanted to place Billy with, it had always been some sort of resigned, bored sounding thing.

"I can't believe I didn't think of talking to Joyce sooner."

Hopeful... Was it because he wanted to see Billy in a good home, or just because he wanted to be rid of the headache that was the shitty blonde? It had to be the latter right? Nobody wanted what was best for him, just to be rid of him. All except Neil and he fucking hated the fact that he held Neil in higher regard than all these fucks' lives he'd been whirlwinded through. At least Neil had wanted him for something. At least to Neil he'd been useful, and not some pet project, or a burden to be shoved off onto someone else.

"Did you tell her how fucked up I am?" Billy asked petulantly, his voice a growl as he stabbed the nasty salisbury steak. It was better than starving, so he shoved it in his mouth and chewed.

"I told her you've got a temper, but it's not my place to tell her what you've been through. That's up to you if you want to tell them." Billy's brows raised, and he actually looked up at Hopper. He hadn't told her... had he told any of them? On the one hand, no wonder none of them wanted him, they hadn't expected a pathetic waste of space that was only good for one thing in this god forsaken world. On the other hand... he felt a lightness in his chest. Something like gratitude if that was even a feeling he could have. He didn't exactly want it known that even his own father hated him. In a town this small, everyone had to know that Neil Hargrove had gone to prison but if Hopper wasn't telling... maybe they didn't know why.

The hope in Hopper's voice, along with this small kindness he didn't deserve... Billy could try one last time. If it didn't work out here, if he couldn't get along with them, that was it. He'd fuck off and stop being anyone's problem but his own. If he was honest, that's how he'd prefer it. In that one moment however, he felt like he might owe to Hopper. Billy never felt like he owed anyone anything but to Hopper... maybe it wasn't just about the young man being a burden on him.

There was a picture that Billy had seen Hopper looking at one night when he'd been drinking after a long day at work. Once the chief had started slurring his words, Billy had been on high alert and was making his way outside to go smoke, and get out of the suffocating walls that smelled like booze and made him ache with bruises he didn't bare anymore on his skin but rather felt bone deep. Hopper had been in his chair in the living room and Billy was quiet, not wanting to have to explain himself. It wasn't necessary, the older man had fallen asleep with a photo in his hand of a cute little blonde girl in pigtails that he only now realized made him think of Holly.

She'd obviously been important to him, and he'd wondered offhand what happened to her then but now it was an insidious thought in his brain. Was she why he was being so patient with Billy? Who was she? Hopper's daughter? Someone he failed to save once upon a time? Billy supposed it didn't matter so much *who* she was, but thinking back now, he wanted to thank her, for whatever impact she'd put on the gruff chief to make him think that Billy Hargrove was worth trying to find a home for. That was an odd feeling in and of itself, he wasn't someone with a vocabulary that included 'thank you' or 'I'm sorry' unless it was forced out of him. It must be the emotions he'd felt last night, wiggling their way into his stone cold give no fucks mentality.

"You think this one will work?" He'd finally asked, skeptical.

"If anyone will work, it's Joyce and Bob the Brain." Billy's raised eyebrow had Hopper laughing, "That's what we called him in high school. Nice guy, but a nerd through and through." Hopper had gone on to tell him more about the family then. Joyce had two children, one of which he knew from school. Jonathan Byers was quiet, and if

his little brother was anything like Jonathan, he'd be just as quiet and a little creepy too. Apparently Bob and Joyce were still dating but they were pretty serious. Bob apparently had been a great influence on the kids since their deadbeat dad Lonnie had left and Hopper thought maybe Bob would be good for him too. Billy stayed silent and bit his lip almost to bleeding rather than say he really fucking doubted anyone with a name like 'Bob the Brain' could be good for him. Hopper took his silence as agreement and finally went back to his food.

Being around Hopper, sitting down to dinner with him was... easier than it had been with those families he'd been staying with. Hopper was gruff, more what he was used to with Neil, just without the aggression. Hopper was loud, didn't give a fuck how kind he was with his words, and said shit like he saw it. In the beginning he'd wondered why he couldn't just stay on the Chief's couch and stay out of his hair but after a few weeks of back and forth, he knew the man wasn't in any place to accept Billy to live with him and he doubted the social worker, who always made sure he'd have his own room first, would allow him living on a couch in a bachelor pad. Thinking back to the picture of the blonde girl in pigtails... Billy wondered if it was his daughter... maybe the man wasn't ready to take care of another kid, almost grown or not.

So with that thought in mind, and Hopper's hope trying to take flight in his chest, he looked out the window as they drove, counting the trees to keep his mind from racing at the thought of going to yet another home that may or may not work out. Billy only had enough things to fill a duffel bag that had been tossed in the back of the cruiser but at the bottom were two things he'd never even taken out at any of the homes, too sure they'd be temporary to warrant putting up such important things to him. The first was a picture of Stevie Nicks. It was an iconic photo, in her top hat and shawl. His mother had loved her and in his good memories of her, the ones that rarely made him sick anymore, she was dressed like her. Long flowing skirts, shawls over her thin shoulders even in the California heat, and her blonde hair always down in long waves cascading over her back.

The second thing was the only picture he had left of the two of them. He'd been young, seven years old, smiling in that gapped tooth way

that only children could be, her arm wrapped around him in a loving embrace that he still found he still remembered the feeling of to this day. He hated it sometimes, the longing that would come with remembering. Other times he embraced it as the last little bit of something good that could hold together all his broken pieces and keep him from shattering completely. If there was one thing that fucking bastard of a father didn't deserve, it was getting to know or see that Billy was completely broken. He'd never let that happen as long as he was alive to do so, almost like a last 'fuck you'. Billy would get the last word in, even if it was unspoken.

The cruiser finally pulled to a stop outside a house that seemed to sit on a large lot. The closest neighbors had been a while back and Billy was surprised by that. All the other families that Hopper had taken him to had lived in the suburbs, houses smushed together with manicured lawns and neighbors who remarked at dinner how it was just so amazing and noble for them to take in the bastard child that nobody wanted. Idly he wondered what those neighbors were saying about him now.

Billy still had half a cigarette left when he slung the duffel bag over his shoulder, smoke curling through the afternoon air lazily, catching in the breeze that blew through the trees. It was both quieter and louder than it was in the suburbs, in different ways. He could hear all the leaves rubbing against each other, a facsimile of the sound of rain on the roof that he found strangely soothing. There was none of the sounds of cars, or water sprinklers going, no laughter of children on their bikes, or yelling at each other down the street. It was a peaceful sort of loud that Billy thought he could appreciate if he gave himself the chance.

Before they'd even made it to the door, it opened and a tiny woman with unkempt hair and a t-shirt three sizes too big for her walked out the door with a bright smile in place. It was different from the other smiles of the ladies in the houses he'd been to before. It wasn't perfectly in place, like she needed to impress anyone. It seemed genuine, lines carved deep around her mouth like it was a constant expression. He couldn't explain why but it made him think of homemade cookies and warm cocoa on cold nights. A habitual frown pulled down the corners of his mouth at how uncomfortable that

made him, and he took the cigarette from his mouth, flicking the ash onto the brown lawn.

“You must be Billy!” She said, and her voice was like her smile but ten fold. Billy wasn’t sure if he liked the way it made him feel or not.

“Yeah.” He said, shoving the cigarette back in his mouth. A clearing of the throat from Hopper had Billy cutting a look at him, before finally meeting the woman’s eyes again. “I mean yes ma’am.”

“Don’t be such a stickler Jim.” She said to the Chief, putting her hands on her hips and giving him a playful narrowing of eyes.

“Just want to make sure he keeps his manners.” Hopper said gruffly, crossing his arms. Billy shifted his feet and adjusted the bag on his shoulder.

“Come on Billy, let me show you around.” Joyce said, reaching for him and up, touching his back between his shoulder blades to usher him towards the house. All of Billy’s muscles tensed and her hand moved away immediately. She gave him a smile and for a moment he thought she was going to apologize. He couldn’t look at her, didn’t want to see pity in her eyes, so instead, he ripped the cigarette out of his mouth, and pinched the cherry out. There was a bucket full of sand with a number of butts in it and he tossed the trash there. When he looked back up, there was no pity, only a careful smile and a hand held out instead to suggest he enter the cozy little house.

“Bob’s not home from work yet, he couldn’t take the day off but he’ll be home in a few hours, in time for dinner.” Joyce said, her voice light and airy, “He’s very excited to meet you.”

Billy barely stopped the scoff from leaving his mouth as he stepped inside. The thought that anyone would be excited to meet him was funny on its own, but he supposed she’d figure that out soon enough. The living room was warm and very lived in. The coffee table was covered in rings from spilled coffee and sweating cups, and it was littered with papers full of drawings. Colored pencils were spread out like their owner had been called away in the middle of use and at least a few magazines were peeking out from all the clutter. Family

portraits hung on the wall, all of them smiling. Some with just Joyce, Jonathan, and a smaller boy he assumed was Will. Others included a man who he assumed was Bob, with a big smiling grin. Billy could tell immediately why he was called Bob the Brain and shook his head lightly to himself.

As usual his eyes flicked around, taking in the kitchen just through the doorway and the back door, a quick escape, the pictures were all hung low, the coffee table and a few side tables were noted, as well as bookshelves. There was a flurry of sound and Jonathan stepped out around the corner, bad haircut and all, a tiny version of him tagging along behind. The kid took one look at him, in his tight jeans and tighter shirt, earring in one ear and wild unruly hair, and tilted his head to one side. He was looking at Billy like he was a puzzle to piece together, and he intentionally furrowed his brows at him. He wasn't something to be taken apart and figured out, and the mousey boy would do well to know that from the beginning.

"These are my sons Billy. I think you know Jonathan from school." She said moving to them, and wrapping her arms around them, one around the elder's waist, the other around the younger's shoulders, "And this cute little bean sprout is Will." She leaned over and kissed him on top of the head. Will screwed up his face and shoved at her with a smile.

"Mo-om. Knock it off." Came his soft voice and Billy was floored. She touched them so easily, so warmly, and this kid was just shrugging it off. He'd done it earlier but he didn't know Joyce, and there was a particularly gnarly scar down his spine that was like a direct line to his fight or flight instinct that her fingers had brushed.

Hopper cleared his throat again and when Billy looked up at him, he nodded his head in the kids' direction. For a moment he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do, then it hit him. Joyce had just introduced her sons to him and he was staring like an idiot. "Billy." He said curtly, though they had known that, since she'd already said something and well... Jonathan knew him from school. Joyce beamed like he'd done something she should be proud of and his muscles tensed to keep from fidgeting under that gaze.

"We're in the process of cleaning out the extra bedroom for you. It'll still take a few days since Bob and I both work and of course your bed will have to be ordered in, but Will's rooming with Jonathan until then." She said brightly. She was kicking her own kid out of his bed to give him a place to sleep?

"I can take the couch." The words came out without his permission and he was furious at how weak they sounded.

"I don't mind." Will piped up, his brows drawn up and the corners of his mouth lifting in the start of a smile, "It'll be like a sleep over kinda! Even if Jonathan cuddles in his sleep." He made an exaggerated grumpy face and it was obvious he was teasing.

"Shut up. At least I don't starfish like you do punk." Jonathan said, shoving Will lightly behind Joyce's back. Billy tensed at the contact but the kid didn't move more than an inch and shoved him lightly back in front of his mother.

"Boys." She said, sounding fond and exasperated in the same breath. They stopped and smiled at each other as she continued speaking, "I'm not going to make you sleep on the couch Billy. You deserve to have a bed for the night. I'm just sorry we don't have one for you already. I tried to get one yesterday but all they had in stock was the model."

Billy felt like he couldn't get any air in his lungs. She said it so casually. ' *You deserve to have a bed for the night.* ' She didn't know what he did and didn't deserve but she said it so... flippantly. Like it was a fact and not a question at all. He didn't know that anyone had ever said something like that to him before. Sure he was full of his own bravado, putting on an air like he was better than everyone else at school, but it was all false confidence. No one knew that but Billy though. The hope that had been trying to take flight in his chest yesterday when Hopper had sounded so full of it tried to take flight again. With vigor he crushed it down as tiny as possible and shoved it into the recesses of his mind. Hope was worthless for him. All it would do was hurt him more when this family ultimately decided he wasn't worth it.

“Okay.” He said, unsure of what else to say. Most people would say thank you but he wasn’t being forced, so he wasn’t about to say it.

“Will’s room is just down this way.” She said, patting both of her boys on the shoulders and turning to go down the hallway. She gave him a verbal tour, pointing at each of the rooms and explaining what they were, the bathroom, Jonathan’s room, the room that would be his. She pointed over her shoulder at the other side of the house, denoting which was her and Bob’s room, and the kitchen and washroom. Finally she opened Will’s door and stepped back so he could enter.

It was obviously a child’s room, plenty of toys present and a desk full of more drawings. It had been Will that left the drawings on the coffee table it seemed. He stepped in, looking all around the room and again, taking in the furniture and the doors. The window was just big enough for him to shimmy through if he had to. Laughter filtered in from the living room as Jonathan chased Will outside and he could see the two of them through the window into the front yard. Jonathan picked Will up on his shoulders and twirled him around with a laugh.

“I’ve told them to let you have your space for today, that you might need some time to settle in.” Joyce said from behind him. She didn’t make a move to touch him like she had earlier but she looked like she wanted to. “You’re welcome to join us if you want to once you’ve settled in a little. We all have chores and I’d like to talk to you about what you’d be comfortable doing sometime in the next few days. With Bob and I working we all pitch in a little.”

She smiled and Billy found himself wanting to smile back. He didn’t.

“I hope that you can be happy here Billy.” She said finally. That small sentence seemed so easy for her to say and Billy couldn’t fathom having hopes or dreams hardly, much less saying them so openly.

I hope that you can be happy here. She didn’t even know him, didn’t know whether he was a piece of shit, or an angel. Well that wasn’t exactly true he supposed, Hopper had told her he had a temper. Still that was putting it mildly but she just... *didn’t know* . Yet it was as if

she was as sure of these things for him as she would be for her own children. She thought he *deserved* things, that he should be *happy*. The thought stalled in his brain, stuck like a wheel in a rut. It didn't make sense to him at all and he felt like his ears should be smoking from how hard his brain was trying to process the thought. He could only keep coming back to one phrase that was repeating over and over in his mind.

She doesn't know me.

The tiny woman was looking up at him, the warmth never leaving her face despite the fact that he'd probably been staring at her like an idiot for the past minute. She seemed to be waiting for a response though, so he nodded, the motion jerky since his brain was still busy trying to comprehend her words. The smile on her face widened and she reached up to pat his arm, then stopped a few inches from actually touching him. Her fingers curled back towards her palm and finally the smile faded from her face. Something curled up and died in his belly. Despite the fact that he'd been unsure of how exactly her warmth had made him feel, he wanted to bring it back. It felt *wrong* to have taken that from her.

"Billy, can I ask you one question before I let you settle in? If it makes you uncomfortable to answer it, you can just tell me and I'll leave it alone." The blonde felt cold sweat break out over the back of his neck and over his upper lip. Still he nodded because Billy Hargrove wasn't supposed to be afraid of anything, especially not this small perceptive woman who knew too much but couldn't *actually* hurt him in any way.

"I noticed earlier," She said, drawing out her words as if she wasn't quite sure yet how to word what she wanted to ask him, "Well.... You see sometimes I don't exactly think about things and well... we want you to be comfortable here..." She trailed off, fidgeting with her fingers nervously. Billy kind of wanted to shake her and tell her to spit it out already but she looked like she might fall apart if he so much as touched her. Instead he just clenched his fists and continued to stare at her as she rambled.

"It's just... when I touched you earlier you tensed up-" There he

went, tensing up against at the mention of it, “-and I wanted to ask if you’re just not comfortable being touched at all? Or maybe if it was because it was unexpected? We’re just a very tactile family you see and we want to make sure you’re comfortable here...” She had sped up the longer she was talking and the last bit was a repeated sentiment. Neil had always made him repeat things that were supposed to be important. Did that mean that she found his comfort important? He put that question to the side to ruminate about later and thought instead about the question she asked.

His first reaction was to pull away from any touch. The only time he was ever really touched was in violence and outside of Neil he was the one usually initiating, or at least goading someone into punching *him*. He wasn’t a fucking pussy, he didn’t need soft touches. Then he thought about how gently she’d touched her sons, holding them close. It was like they were worth something to her, like they were *precious*. A memory of running into his mother’s arms flashed across his conscious thought unbidden and it was like a sucker punch to the gut. His eyes prickled embarrassingly and he viciously turned his whole body away from her, feeling the earring in his left ear tapping his neck from where it was swinging at the motion. His mother would *not* get his tears, and that was fucking *final*.

“It’s okay if the answer is ‘I don’t know’ dear.” Joyce’s voice was quiet, like she was afraid of spooking him further and a little confused. He didn’t blame her, she had no clue what the hell was going on in his head. The suggestion though, that it was alright not to really have an answer and just express that stole the very breath out of his lungs in relief.

“I don’t know...” He said, his voice hoarse as he fought back the swell of tears that he was fucking adamant would not fall.

“That’s perfectly fine honey.” He couldn’t see it but he could tell that her smile had returned from the sound of her voice, “I’ll do my best to respect your boundaries. If any of us cross them, just let us know. We’ll learn even if some of us are a little slow about it.” The tears came back full force. He wanted to kick and scream and break things but it was such a kind gesture from her that he didn’t dare.

"I'll leave you to get settled in now. Come out if you want to, if not I'll let you know when dinner is ready." The door closed behind her, and the blonde stumbled the last few steps to the bed before sagging onto it. He wanted to chase after her, to scream in her face and ask her why she was doing all of this. His feet would hold him up right now, even if he tried and his cup was too full to risk putting more drips in it right now. Instead, he buried his face in his hands, fingers clenching so tightly in his hair it hurt and sobbed as quietly as he possibly could.

No one had ever asked him about his boundaries before. He wasn't allowed any. Was this how other people lived their lives? Was this what families should be like? He'd assumed his was mostly normal, he was just such a piece of shit that he deserved most of what he got. That in some way he didn't understand, Neil had been justified. Had he been wrong? It was quite a revelation to have, sitting in a room that clearly showed how much its owner was loved.

Maybe that was the answer then. William D. Hargrove was *unlovable*. That had to be it.

As angry as it made him, as much as he hated it, blaming Neil for any of it was still hard sometimes. He could remember how much he'd fought against Hopper when they were taking Neil away. Mostly because of the fear that if he didn't Neil would think he planned all of it. That they would find out Neil wasn't doing anything wrong and it would be taken from his flesh for penance when they got home. Hopper had talked a lot that first night, about how none of it was Billy's fault, that he was a victim. The teenager had mostly blown it off, and hadn't realized until just now that maybe it wasn't all a crock of shit after all. He wasn't a fucking victim, that was for sure, he wouldn't let himself be. But maybe it wasn't exactly anything he'd... really done to make Neil hit him.

Billy sucked in a wet, hitching breath and tilted his head back to stem the flow of tears down his cheeks. "*Fuck.*" he said quietly to himself. He needed a fucking cigarette, but there was no way he was going out where anyone could see him until he'd washed his face and made sure the redness was gone from his eyes. He stayed there, looking up at the ceiling for a good fifteen minutes after they stopped and he

gave a sniff before rubbing his sleeve across his eyes. The bathroom was practically right next door to Will's room and luckily he met no one in the short trip.

The water was cold, and it felt good when he splashed it up over the heated skin of his face. Billy cupped his hands, and held the cool water over his eyes, hoping to quell any swelling that might have started. When the water had started to warm, he let it fall from his hands, and washed his face once more. The blonde looked up into the mirror above the sink, lashes dark and dripping water, eyes clear and gave himself a cocky smirk that he didn't feel. He could do this. He had to.

When he opened the door of the bathroom, he took a moment to really listen like he had outside. Joyce was in the kitchen, the sound of a wooden spoon scraping the bottom of a pan as she cooked didn't grate like it usually would. Hopper's gruff voice also cut through the air though Billy couldn't tell what they were talking about and he wasn't sure he wanted to. Outside he could hear the soft voices of the two boys speaking to each other, followed by the pattering of feet. Music played softly from somewhere, Ziggy Stardust by the sound of it. The beginning of a smile tugged at the corners of his lips and he shook his head. Anyone who listened to Ziggy couldn't be *all* that bad. The pack of cigarettes was pulled from his pocket as he opened the front door to step outside.

Will was running across the front yard in that weird gait that meant he hadn't quite grown into the lanky length of his limbs just yet that all kids that age had. Jonathan was sitting on the step of the front porch watching the kid chasing what might be some of the last fireflies in the early stages of fall. His head turned to the door when Billy stepped out onto the porch, and he offered the blonde a small smile.

"Hey." He said softly. He gestured to the place beside him nonchalantly, "You wanna take a seat?" Billy noticed that he had his mother's smile, warm and wide, unabashed in just showing pleasantness, even if it was a little more tempered. Like a burning ember rather than a warm fire in winter. Slowly, unsure if he really wanted to take the seat or not, Billy folded his limbs and sat down

next to the other boy, resting his arms on his knees while he lit his cigarette.

He hadn't always been kind towards Jonathan at school. Nothing to his face of course, only things said to Tommy H in passing as some kind of joke at the guy's expense. Tommy had warned him from day one last year when he started going to Hawkins High that Jonathan was *definitely* not one of the in crowd. He wasn't supposed to be more than fodder for the cool kids' amusement. Billy didn't really talk to Tommy H anymore, not since he'd been moving around so much and it became clear that no adult in town really wanted him. It wasn't because Tommy H thought he wasn't cool anymore, rather Billy had a lot more to worry and think about than how the rest of the kids at school thought about him. He mostly just kept his head down and kept up with his work these days. The popularity would be there when he wanted it, if he wanted it. Of that he was sure.

He didn't say anything in response for a long time. He didn't really know *what* to say if he was honest. What did you say to the kid who lived in the same house as you without being related, someone who you'd mercilessly made fun of behind their back? Like it or not, his place in this house was dictated by how much the kids got along, that much was clear from the Wheelers. Finally, he figured out a way to word what was on his mind without giving too much away.

"Your mom always like that?" He asked gruffly, his voice muffled by the cigarette still hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Like what?" Jonathan asked, his head giving a curious tilt.

"All..." Billy gestured aggressively with his hands, "I dunno, fluffy."

Jonathan gave a laugh, and it rankled the blonde's nerves. His shoulders tensed, going up around his shoulders and he shot the other boy a glare. Was he making fun of him? Jonathan just held up his hands and shook his head, brows drawn up in concern, but the smile didn't fade from his face.

"Yeah, Mom's always like that. Just wait until you see how sweet she is around Bob."

“That’s her boyfriend right?” Billy asked, giving off an air like he didn’t care. In reality he very much cared. The man might look like a nerd, but any ‘father’ figure made him nervous these days.

“Yeah.” Jonathan said, wrinkling his nose like he didn’t exactly like the description.

“What’s he like?” Jonathan turned to look at Billy, brows raised so high they disappeared behind his mop of hair.

“Bob? He’s cool I guess. Weird, like.... He tries to be cool but he’s...” Jonathan gave a sigh, “He’s just so not.” The boy chuckled and shook his head again while Billy had a momentary struggle with himself over what he wanted to ask next.

“Does he ever get mad?” Now Jonathan’s eyes were narrowing and he was really looking at Billy now, and the blonde wasn’t sure he liked the perceptive expression.

“Bob? I don’t think he even knows the meaning of the word angry dude.” Billy just nodded. Time would tell of course, because Billy fucking Hargrove always could pull anger out of anyone without even trying. Jonathan opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, then closed it again. Billy looked at him out of the corner of his eyes and furrowed his brow.

“Just fucking spit it out Byers.” He said with an intimidating growl to his voice. Just because he was living here, he didn’t want Jonathan to think he’d gone soft or anything.

“I... okay look.” He ran a hand through his hair and it stuck up in a few places, like it wasn’t quite used to being touched. Billy had to admit that he’d probably look less creepy with a better haircut. “I know you’ve got the whole tough guy thing going on and that’s fine. You wanna treat me like I’m a freak at school? That’s fine too. I just... Can we not bring that here?” Jonathan wasn’t looking at Billy after that little tirade, instead he was watching his brother running around with his arms extended, having finally found a firefly to chase within reach.

“The fuck? You asking me to- what? Play nice here at home? Act like we’re brothers or some shit?”

“You’re not my brother.” Jonathan said quickly, his voice like ice in a way the blonde had never heard before. Billy took a heavy drag off his cigarette and blew the smoke out over their heads. It hung heavy in the air, twisting and coiling over itself. If he was honest, that’s kind of what his insides felt like at Jonathan’s request, and the swift reaction after. The other took a deep breath like he was calming himself down. Shame... Billy could really use a fight right about now. It was probably a bad idea to pick a fight his first day anyway, so it was all for the better anyway.

“Look dude, you’re... you’re a fucking prick... okay? And like I get that’s who you are... but can you just... not be like that here? My mom and Will deserve better than that bad attitude, okay?” Jonathan looked angry, something Billy had never really seen before on the elder Byers face. He raised a brow in retaliation at that expression, as if asking what the fuck Jonathan was going to do about it if he didn’t agree to this little request.

Tension sparked between them and it was almost a physical weight on Billy’s shoulders. It was familiar, and Billy settled under the weight of it. This he knew, and he could feel a sense of normalcy returning after feeling so out of control with the constant revolving door of where he was living. His hand balled into a fist at his side, and he grinned around the edges of his cigarette. He couldn’t remember where he’d read it, but it had always felt true for himself. *Animals bare their teeth when they’re preparing to attack. Remember that the next time I smile.*

“You gonna do something about it if I don’t?” He asked, reaching up and taking the cigarette from his mouth so his tongue could slither across his lower lip enticingly. Jonathan’s face only hardened further, he wasn’t frightened the way so many people were of the caged, wild animal that was Billy Hargrove and that pissed the blonde off. Why the fuck wasn’t Jonathan scared of him?

“Yeah. If I have to.” He said seriously. Their eyes were connected, it

felt like, by a line of pure aggression. The hairs on the back of his neck were standing at attention, and electricity tickled down his arms as his fist clenched tighter. From his peripherals he could see that Jonathan was doing the same, ready to fight 'if he had to'.

"Billy?" The voice was soft, quiet, and totally unexpected. The moment with Jonathan was tempered, but not broken, and with a lingering glare, he finally turned to face the younger Byers who'd called his name. Will was almost the exact opposite of Jonathan at that moment, eyes wide, brows high, smile innocent and light. His hands were clasped together tightly, twisted so that there was a hollow between them. Sweat coated his forehead and upper lip from running around in the still balmy evening, but it was the hope in his eyes that gave Billy pause. His hand unclenched and he turned to the younger boy, brows raising as he shoved his cigarette back between his teeth to chew on the filter.

"Yeah kid?" he asked. Jonathan beside him looked more tense than before, if that was even possible.

"I caught you a firefly. Will you hold it while I go get a jar?" Will's face was open, and full of that child-like innocence that meant he really didn't know any better. Or maybe he did, and just wanted his brother to stop feeling like he had to fight. Billy raised his other eyebrow in a look of surprise.

"What for?"

"Well... the first time I stayed over at Mike's house, I was really nervous, because it was someplace new. He caught me a firefly for a night light so I could see all the corners in his room. It made me feel better then, I thought maybe... you might like a firefly friend for your first night here too."

Billy was stuck in some weird alternate dimension. That was the only explanation for both Joyce and Will being so fucking kind to him. Will looked so excited, so happy to try and give him this gift, and it was incredibly sweet. Billy frowned, and Jonathan moved at his side, putting a hand on Will's shoulder supportively.

“Will, I don’t think that Billy-”

“Sure, give it here.” Jonathan turned to look at him with surprise as Billy held his hands out to cover the smaller hands and take the firefly. The boy beamed up at him with a smile that could light all of Hawkins, and stuck his tongue out while he tried to extricate his hands while still keeping the firefly from escaping. They were so small in his own hands, delicate, fragile. His heart gave a sickening twist and Billy *knew*. He wouldn’t be Neil. For this kid, he could be nice, or as nice as Billy could *ever* get, but he wouldn’t be like his father, breaking down that precious smile and destroying his happiness just because the blonde wasn’t.

Finally Will was able to pull his hands away and Billy clamped his hands closed, feeling the little bug buzzing away in its makeshift cage, angry at having been trapped against its will. The little boy ran inside, and the teenager could hear him telling Joyce all about it, and that he needed a jar with holes in the lid. Jonathan’s gaze on him felt like it was burning a hole in the side of his head. The longer it stayed on him, the further down on his face his brows lowered. Smoke curled up, and got into his eyes, and he cursed softly under his breath before tilting his head back.

“That was nice of you.” Jonathan said cautiously. When Billy opened his eyes again and looked over at the other teenager, his expression was guarded, hidden behind the carefully arranged pensiveness that usually adorned his face.

“Shut up.” Billy growled, his thumb twitching as the wings of the firefly tickled his palm, “It’s not for you.”

“It doesn’t matter why.” Jonathan said, turning back to look at the setting sun over the trees, and tilting his head back to let the gentle breeze play over his face, “I just... have to take care of my family. I know we have Bob *now* , but for a long time we didn’t. I guess I’m still really protective of them.”

Billy wondered what that was like, having someone who was willing to protect you when things got tough. Someone who cared enough to

take the punches they thought were coming if it meant that you didn't have to. It was a foreign concept that he didn't want to examine too closely when he wasn't alone.

The wind blew a curl over his forehead and Billy cut his eyes back to look at the ceiling once more. He didn't know why Jonathan shared that little bit of vulnerability with him, it was definitely something he could exploit. It was something he might have exploited before but in this moment, he felt a sort of truce forming between the other teenager and himself. It wasn't a friendship, Billy didn't think he or Jonathan either one wanted that, but it was like a promise that neither one of them would purposefully fuck over the other one. He could live with that.

"Alright."

"Alright?" Jonathan asked, clearly having not followed his thought process.

"I can't promise I won't end up being an asshole at some point. It's kind of who I am, you were right about that. Sometimes I don't..." He trailed off for a moment, closing his eyes again and pushing himself to continue despite every piece of himself pushing against it, "Sometimes I don't mean to be, and it comes out that way anyway. But I'll... I'll try. They're too nice for me to be an asshole to them anyway."

"And I'm not?" Jonathan asked, but he didn't sound offended. A quick look proved that his expression was amused. Billy really thought about that for a moment. Jonathan hadn't ever done anything to him either, other than not be popular. Billy didn't like thinking about that, so like everything else he didn't want to think about today he pushed it down into the back recesses of his mind to think about tonight when he was alone and likely wouldn't be able to sleep.

"You did threaten me, asshole." He said instead, giving him a sneer and tilting his head back up normally.

"Yeah," Jonathan said with a small laugh, "I did, but you kinda

deserved it.”

“Suppose I did.” Billy admitted before he could think not to.

“Maybe, but... thank you.”

“Shut up Byers.”

If Jonathan was going to say something else, he was interrupted by Will bursting back out through the door with the jar in hand. He looked excited, lid in the other hand as he shot past them out into the yard.

“Let me just get some leaves and sticks and stuff!” He called back, and Jonathan chuckled fondly beside Billy. He could feel the same sentiment, but didn’t join in the laughter. Instead he wore his frown like armor against the insidiously good feelings that were trying to take hold in his chest. The thumping of boots sounded behind him, signalling that Hopper was coming out onto the porch as well. Billy tilted his head back, and could see that Joyce had followed and was also smiling fondly out at her son. He looked back down at his cupped hands quickly, hating the flash of jealousy that kicked at his lungs like a horse. He didn’t want that smile, no matter how his body was feeling.

He didn’t belong here. They’d all see that in time.

“Everything okay out here?” Hopper asked. There was silence for a moment as the long trail of ash from Billy’s cigarette fell and hit his thigh, scattering as the breeze picked it up and spread it over the porch.

“It’s chill.” Jonathan answered, “Billy and I were just talking a little bit, about school and stuff.” It wasn’t exactly a lie and when their eyes met, Jonathan gave him a kind smile. Billy looked away again and nodded. Maybe Jonathan wasn’t so bad after all.

“Good to hear.” Hopper replied as the sound of a car coming down the drive drew all eyes upwards. The red Toyota sedan pattered down the drive and pulled to a stop on the left side of the driveway.

Billy huffed a laugh to himself. It wasn't a little red Corvette, but rather the dorkier version he supposed. Will returned while the car was turning off and held the jar out to Billy drawing his attention away from the recent arrival.

"Ready to put him in?" He asked, eyes bright.

"You think you can close it in time?" Billy returned the question with another.

"I think so. Can you like... throw him down a little?" That question was so innocuously asked that the laugh was out of Billy's mouth before he could stop it. He could feel Hopper's eyes on the back of his neck out of surprise and his shoulders rose a little. It was disguised as a shrug thankfully and Billy held his hands up and over the mouth of the jar.

"Can try." he said simply. Will held the jar lid close to Billy's knuckles, ready to slam it closed and the tongue had made a reappearance in his concentration. "Alright kid, on three. One... two.... Three." The blonde shoved downward, forcing the bug deep into the jar and the two of them worked surprisingly in sync. When the jar closed with a metallic scrape and the twist was given, Will gave a triumphant shout.

"WE DID IT!" he cried, holding the jar aloft like it was the holy grail or some shit. Still, his excitement was infectious and Billy allowed a curl of his lip.

"Yeah. We did it." He said softly, only loud enough for the boys to hear. Jonathan's smile, that gentle, warm thing was on him again. He could almost feel the heat brushing the left side of his face. When their eyes met, the other teen just gave Billy a nod. He could almost hear the approval, like he'd had earlier when he said Billy was being nice. In true fashion, he rolled his eyes in return.

"Do you mind if I go show Bob?" Will asked, "Then I'll bring him right back and we can name him." The fact that he asked and didn't just run off with it like Billy would have expected made his stomach clench. All the blonde could do was nod and watch that fawn like

lack of grace gallop across the yard to the portly man climbing out of the Toyota.

Arms opened wide and enveloped Will into an exaggerated hug that had them both laughing. Will held the jar up and Bob put his hands on his knees to squat down and look at it. He touched the glass, probably pointing at the little bug and must have asked a question, because Will shook his head and gestured back at the porch. Bob looked up and their eyes met. Billy was sure his insides were made of earthworms from how squirmy they felt. He kept waiting for that expression to fall, looking at the dirty kid they were going to have to feed and house for the foreseeable future.

Any second now.

Wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

Suddenly, as if there had been a cut skip in the film of his life, Bob and Will were right in front of him and that warm smile that had lit up his round face when the kid raced over to show off his firefly trophy was still in place. It hadn't dimmed at all, in fact if anything it had gotten brighter. If Jonathan was an ember, and Joyce a calm winter flame, Bob was a raging bonfire with the weight and heat of the kindness playing over his face. Hazel eyes almost seemed to sparkle in the fading light of day and try as Billy might, he couldn't find a single ounce of strained or falseness in his expression. Perhaps a little bit of nervousness but the warmth was almost overwhelming.

"Hi there, you must be Billy!" He said, extending his hand out to shake. Like Billy was worth respect. Like he was Bob's *equal*, "I'm Bob Newby. It's nice to finally meet you. I've been so excited since Jim called us yesterday." Billy stared at his hand, his eyes a little wide. It stayed there, despite his gawking and after a moment he reached out and put his hand in the one offered. Bob shook his hand firmly, and nodded.

"Hi." Billy finally managed, feeling awkward and put on the back foot by this man who had just waltzed into his life and turned

everything upside down. The men in all the other houses hadn't been like Neil, not angry or blustery. Most had been like Mr. Wheeler, distracted by work or something similar. Bob though, he was like the polar opposite of Neil and Billy wasn't sure if he just thought people like that didn't exist and made it through to be dads... Like there was some unspoken rule that they had to be some kind of piece of shit for the title. Technically he supposed Bob wasn't exactly a dad, just Joyce's boyfriend for the time being. Surely he was close enough to one if he was seriously dating her enough to be in the 'family' portraits.

"Well." Hopper said, clearing his throat for the umpteenth time that day, and graciously saving Billy from the awkwardness, "Cynthia will be by tomorrow to check out the house and everything, she might give you hell on the room, but tell her if she's got any problems, she can talk to me about it."

Joyce thanked him, and Billy looked away from the whole ordeal, taking one last drag off his cigarette and tossing it into the butt pot beside him. Hopper was putting his hat back on, and moving down the step, between him and Jonathan, and back out to his cruiser. "I'll check on you at the end of the week Billy, if you need anything between now and then, you can call me. Just tell Joyce." The blonde nodded, still a little shell shocked from everything being so far outside his realm of understanding. He was still sitting there, looking at the place where the cruiser had disappeared around the corner a moment later when Joyce clapped her hands together.

"Alright my darling boys, are you all ready for dinner?"

My darling boys. He wasn't one of her boys, how... how the fuck could she just say that? *She didn't* -

"What's for dinner Mom?" Will asked, the proximity of his voice cutting through Billy's internal thoughts.

"Sloppy Joes." She said, something in her voice sounding smug. In front of him Bob gave a little fist pump.

"Heck Yeah! I love Sloppy Joes." He said with enthusiasm that Billy

thought was far too much for the occasion. With that said everyone started moving, heading into the house, Will with firefly in tow. Billy didn't move, he was stuck to his spot still staring at the place Hopper had disappeared, and left him in this crazy alternate dimension.

"Hey." Joyce's voice was soft as she turned back from the door and sat down next to him. "You coming in for dinner?"

Before he could stop himself, before he could even steele his voice into something that didn't shake, he was speaking. The words tumbled off his lips like they couldn't escape fast enough. "You... said your boys." His voice was hoarse, and from the way her brows drew together he could tell she knew exactly what he *wasn't* saying. She'd called for her boys, not him. He wasn't a part of this family, he'd been here less than an hour. He was being excluded and he didn't want to make a big deal of it but for some reason the words had just fallen out of his mouth.

"Oh Billy, sweetheart." She said, and he wanted to hate it. He wanted to scream at her not to patronize him, or pity him. He was startled however when she leaned sideways, laying her head gently on his shoulder. It was a light touch, one he could pull away from if he wanted to. He didn't. He also didn't tense at it either. That touch... that one was okay it seemed. The swooping memories from earlier didn't return, nor did any kind of guilt. If he was being honest with himself, which he definitely was *not*, he'd say it kinda felt nice.

"As long as you're staying under this roof, you're one of my boys too." She tilted her head up to look at him, and he cut blue eyes down to look at her. Her expression was genuine. Like Bob, no matter how much he tried to find a single piece of derision or some clue that she was playing a practical joke on him, he couldn't find a single bit. "If that's alright with you of course."

Billy almost couldn't breathe. The breath he *did* pull in was shuddering and he glared at the grass in front of him instead of letting her see the tumultuous thoughts going on in his mind.

"Y-yeah. I guess that's okay." He said gruffly. Like Jonathan, he could feel her smile warm him all along his left side.

“Good. Now let’s go get some food before the other guys eat it all huh?” She pulled away, and stood, waiting at the door for him to follow behind.

Dinner was delicious and while Billy still felt Bob’s reaction was over the top, he could understand his sentiment. Spending more time with Bob revealed he was just excited about *everything*. Billy’s hobbies, Jonathan’s photography, Will’s drawings, all of it received what he was quickly dubbing the Bob-omb. It was like nothing could phase him, not even Billy’s love for those ‘devil bands’, as Neil called them, like Black Sabbath and Judas Priest. The only negative thing he had to say was that he didn’t think biting the heads off of animals was very nice but Joyce quickly moved them away from that topic when Will nearly choked on his food.

Eventually, all the questions started to get overwhelming and before he could even really start thinking about how much he wanted it to stop, Jonathan changed the subject to Bob’s workday. Billy glanced up to find the elder Byers boy looking at him before giving a nod of acknowledgement. Billy returned the nod and relaxed a little more in his chair. Perhaps this tentative truce was better than he’d first thought.

After dinner, Joyce asked him if he wanted to watch the A-Team with them and Billy hesitantly agreed. Sinking down into an armchair, he settled in, ready to zone out for a little while and just exist. Quickly, he found out that the Byers were one of those families that talked to the TV and despite himself, the teen found a smile settling over his lips. It was stupid really. Nothing they said had any impact on the show, but they were making each other laugh. That seemed more important than anything else.

If there was one thing that he could say the Byers family (plus Newby) held in high regard as a whole, it was laughter. There wasn’t a stretch of ten minutes that went by where *someone* wasn’t laughing. Once it had even been him when Joyce got so frustrated she threw an entire handful of popcorn at the telly. She’d brought him his own bowl since he was sitting alone and he’d thanked her and nibbled on it thoughtfully while they watched. Laughter had always meant

something else in the Hargrove household. If Neil was laughing, it wasn't full of joy. It was a dark and sinister sound that meant Billy had really fucked up this time. Here though, it was light and care free. At first he'd been on edge every time someone cackled in delight, but now that he had realized nothing harsh was going to follow he was getting used to it.

An hour into their TV watching session, Will clambered off the love seat next to Jonathan to sit on the floor at Billy's feet. He stared at the boy for a moment, until the kid started to discuss the naming of the firefly he'd caught. Will was dead set on the name Glowbie, but after a while they decided to leave it until morning. Billy thought that once the discussion was over Will would go back to sit with Jonathan. Instead he just turned around where he was sitting, and leaned against the chair. Billy didn't let himself think about that too long but he did pass his barely touched bowl of popcorn down to the boy and let him finish it off. Somewhere around ten o'clock he looked down at how quiet Will had been to find the boy fast asleep against his leg, where he'd started to lean about ten minutes before. He'd let him and said nothing, because out of everyone in the house, he probably liked Will the most, and he couldn't find any kind of ulterior motive to his actions and after all, he'd given Billy a firefly friend.

Around eleven Joyce started ushering them all to bed, and the thought of waking the sleeping boy just to make him go to bed was not a pleasant one. Will's bedtime was usually around nine thirty, but he'd begged to stay up an extra thirty minutes since it was Billy's first night there. Like every other time his stomach had flip flopped that day, he hadn't been sure how to feel about it. Joyce had agreed only if he brushed his teeth and changed into his pajamas beforehand. Mrs. Byers was heading his way now, her eyes on Will and something small and panicky shuddered in his lungs. Too many nights of being woken by violence was screaming through his veins and for some reason, Billy felt the unadulterated urge to protect this innocent child against such a thing. It wasn't that he thought Joyce was going to hurt Will, not really, but something in him that he couldn't describe was demanding he react. She reached out to shake the boy's shoulder and Billy's hand landed on hers before she could touch him. The surprise was evident in her face as she turned to look at him and his

breath was coming a little fast and shallow as blue met brown.

“Can-” His voice was raspy from having not used it for the last few hours, sure he’d blame it on that, and he cleared his throat quietly, “Can I just take him to bed? It seems fu- uh... it seems dumb to wake him up only to put him back to bed.” Her smile was fond and that gentle fire crackle was back, shooting up his arm where he touched her hand. He quickly took it back, definitely *dislike* was what he was feeling for that odd squirming that had come back full force in his gut.

“That’s very kind of you Billy. Of course. He’s getting so big that none of us can really carry him anymore. Jonathan tries but usually it’s a difficult thing. You look strong though, just be careful. He’s heavier than he looks.” Billy nodded and with her help they moved him off Billy’s leg so he could stand and scoop the kid into his arms. Will snuffled in that sleepy kid way and shifted, wrapping his arms around Billy’s shoulders. He froze for a moment, heart beating away a mile a minute as he stood there waiting for the panic to subside. The edges of Will’s fingers were just skating the edge of his scar and sweat was starting to break out at his hairline.

“Is he too heavy?” Joyce was like a lifeline when he was adrift at sea and he gratefully latched onto it. Her eyes were wide and her arms were open, ready to catch her son if Billy dropped him.

“No.” His word was whispered, both from trying not to wake Will and an inability to speak any louder, “Just... give me a second.” She nodded and her eyes flicked to his back where Will’s hand was resting so innocently. Billy closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe. He could focus on Joyce’s still warm presence beside him, the sound of Jonathan and Bob talking as they cleaned up the popcorn bowls, and the soft breathing of Will in his arms. He wasn’t with Neil, he was in the Byers’ home where everyone had been nothing but kind, even if he didn’t deserve it. His heart rate slowed, his breathing evened out, and finally Billy nodded to Joyce.

When he opened his eyes, her face was in a different smile than he’d been seeing all day. It wasn’t full of fondness like he was used to and her eyes were a little wet. He raised a brow but she just shook her

head. "I'll tell you once we've put him to bed." She said quietly. He shrugged the shoulder Will wasn't leaning against and followed her down the hallway.

Jonathan's room was much different from Will's but he couldn't make out much detail in the darkness. He let Joyce pull back the covers on the larger bed and tried to lay the kid down as gently as he could manage. The boy was all limbs and it was easier said than done. He was taking Will's arms from around his neck when the boy sucked in a deep breath and opened his eyes blearily.

"Goodnight Billy." He said, voice muffled and lazy with sleep, "Welcome home."

Will rolled over as Joyce tucked him in and kissed his head, completely unaware of how thoroughly he'd just shaken Billy to the core. *Welcome home*. Was that what this feeling he'd been having all night was? Home? Impossible, home was somewhere you slept and avoided as much as you could. Billy couldn't see any of the kids feeling like that about this place. He looked to Joyce who still looked like she had tears in her eyes and all she did was jerk her head towards the door. He followed her out, the door closing silently behind her and he turned to look at her there in the hallway for an explanation.

"I... " She started and her voice sounded emotional. He wasn't exactly sure what his face was doing but he was pretty sure that the question marks in his brain were written all over his face. "I'm just so proud of you Billy. And Will's right, none of us said it because we weren't sure how you'd feel about it but Welcome Home."

Had he ever heard someone tell him they were *proud* of him? There was that word again too, *home*. Did he not know the meaning?

It was like his world had stopped spinning for a moment. Everything all day had felt a bit like some version of reality he was only getting a glimpse at, some dream he never knew could happen. Billy couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but stare at this tiny woman with her family that had just swept in and decided that he was one of them, without knowing anything about him other than he

had a temper sometimes.

“Can I give you a hug Billy?” She asked. He didn’t know if he wanted her to or not but she obviously wanted to give it. Despite all the weird feelings, it had been one of the better days in his life that he could remember that didn’t hurt. Though Billy Hargrove never owed anybody *anything*... If he ever did it was right now. His nod was stiff and robotic but she seemed to understand.

Both hands reached up, holding them open to him so he would have to lean down to her level. His movements were stilted but soon enough he was pressed into her arms and one wrapped loosely around the back of his neck, the other pressed to the back of his head. At first he was unsure what to do to respond, he didn’t remember what a hug was supposed to feel like. After a moment her warmth started to seep into him and for the first time in a long time, he wanted to sink into the touch of another person. Arms wrapped around her back and he let her push his head into her shoulder.

It was like all the weight he’d been carrying on his shoulders since he was seven years old was lifted. Not like it was gone, not even close, but for a moment he could get a full, deep breath like he hadn’t in almost a decade. Once he’d taken one, his body was greedy for more. She smelled like the Sloppy Joes they’d had for dinner, cigarette smoke, and lavender. His eyes burned like hellfire and his lungs felt like they were going to shake apart in his chest. He didn’t want to let go but he wasn’t about to start crying all over her. Crying once today was plenty and while he’d always been far too quick to tear up. That didn’t mean anyone else needed to know about it.

He started to pull away and she lingered for a second longer before she let him go. Her hands brushed his hair out of his face, almost automatically, and cupped his cheek. “Go brush your teeth and head to bed sweetie. We’ll wake you up for breakfast before school in the morning.” Billy nodded, not trusting himself to speak as she walked back into the living room to help Bob and Jonathan move the furniture back, wiping at her face.

Almost mechanically, Billy retrieved his toothbrush and set about taking care of his teeth. With that done, he returned to Will’s room

and undressed for bed. The firefly in its jar sat on the bedside table, light blinking in and out, a bright spot in the otherwise darkness of the room. He pulled the curtain open, letting in the moonlight and tossed the covers back. His eyes were drawn back to his bag, the thought of those two items sitting in the bottom, rarely looked at and never hung. They called to him like a siren song, begging for him to at least set them out. A soft snarl left his lips, and he forcefully turned his back to his duffel and climbed into bed. He had made a promise to himself when he left that house back on Cherry street. He wouldn't hang them up until he was somewhere he was going to stay. They hurt too much to look at on their own, much less having to pack them up every time he moved somewhere new.

Everyone here might be determined he was going to stay but Billy wasn't. The mantra that had started in his mind earlier had adjusted to encompass the whole of the family now.

They don't know me.

They don't know me.

THEY DON'T KNOW ME!

Despite the screaming voice in his head, the firefly caught the corner of his eye and he focused on it. Will didn't know him but he'd known enough to think Billy might be comfortable in an unfamiliar place at night. He'd known when he and Jonathan were fighting, he was sure of it, and of course the kid had to have known how separated he'd felt sitting in a chair when everyone else was paired up watching TV.

They saw too much. All of them, the whole family, even Bob in his oblivious cheerfulness. They saw too much of who he really was without him even having to tell them and like so much that had happened today, he was conflicted about it. He didn't want to be known. He'd kept so much buried deep down inside that he didn't know the first thing about trying to express it, much less wanting to. Still, he couldn't deny that the seamless way they'd accepted him and started to work around his gruffness and his boundaries... it was nice. That thought alone sent ice crystalizing down his entire spine, chilling him from the core outward like a mandala from each

vertebrae.

William Darling Hargrove wasn't allowed anything nice.

Sooner or later things would end here. He'd just have to be ready for it when they did. He could do that, it wouldn't be the first time and it probably wouldn't be the last. He'd muscle through just like everything else and tuck these memories away with all the other bittersweet ones that liked to live in the back of his brain and show up when he least expected them.

Billy hadn't expected to be able to sleep much that night, he rarely did in a new place. Despite his reservations about his own happiness, between the moonlight pouring in the window, allowing him to map out his current space, the residual warmth of Joyce's hug and the gift of a firefly from a boy far too perceptive for his own good, his eyes grew heavy and before he knew it, he was sleeping soundly for the first night in a long time.

Author's Note:

I hope you enjoyed 13k of word vomit haha!

This fic was inspired by this Ritz Cracker ad of all things:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bswAUvEveM8>

Wanna scream at me in real time? Maybe see some art I plan on putting out from this fic and other art? Come follow me on tumblr <http://foksydoodle.tumblr.com>

Your comments breathe life into me, I'd love to hear from you!